

Vt. dental hygienist program is reborn

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WILLISTON -- White-jacketed students hunched over their patients' open mouths in stations at Vermont Technical College's new dental hygiene clinic located in a former retail mall near Taft Corners.

In the nearby radiography unit, second-year student Tracy Criss, 31, of Plattsburgh, N.Y., had a few free minutes between patients on a recent afternoon and gushed about the state-of-the-art equipment she is training on.

"This facility is amazing," said Criss, who worked as an assistant to a dentist before deciding to move up the professional ladder to become a dental hygienist. Looking past her spring graduation, she said, "Going from this equipment to a dental office -- I'm probably going to be stepping down."

The state's only program to train dental hygienists moved to this Williston storefront a month ago, the final step in the program's rebirth.

For 50 years, dental hygienists in the state received their education at the University of Vermont - until officials decided the associate's degree program no longer fit with the university's strategic goals.

Dentists worried about losing the only in-state training program, since hygienists are critical members of the care teams in dental offices.

Dental hygienists collect patient information, take X-rays, clean and polish teeth, make impressions of teeth and teach patients about proper dental care.

"We wanted to have a school here," said Paul Averill, a Burlington dentist. If students had to go out-of-state to become dental hygienists, they would be less likely to return to jobs in Vermont, he said. "People tend to stay where they go to school,"

Vermont Technical College agreed to take over the program because it would expand the college's allied health offerings, said Patricia Menchini, dean of allied health and director of nursing. The college's challenge was to find money to build the clinic that serves as the program's primary classroom. UVM allowed the technical college to run the program in 2004 at UVM's 30-year-old clinic, while Vermont Technical College looked for a new home.

A \$750,000 federal grant secured by Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., state support and a joint fund-raising campaign by the Vermont Dental Society and the Vermont Dental Hygienist Association, enabled Vermont Technical College to renovate a single-story building on Lawrence Place in Williston into the dental hygiene program's new headquarters.

It was important to keep the program in Chittenden County, the most densely populated region in the state, said Ellen Grimes, director of the program when it was at UVM and now at Vermont Technical College. "We need a sufficient number of patients."

As part of their training, the students, supervised by staff, clean teeth and offer other preventive care to the public at reduced fees on several afternoons each week. The schedule expands in the

spring when first-year students are ready to see patients.

Grimes noted that many longtime patients have followed the clinic to Williston. It is located near a bus route for patients without cars, she said. "We always want new patients."

The revitalized dental hygiene program is expected to help with another dental health challenge -- the graying of those practicing dentistry in the state. Judy Fisch, a Rutland dentist in practice for 16 years and president-elect of the Vermont Dental Society, notes that 53 percent of the state's 367 dentists are age 50 or older. Only 10 percent are under 30.

Fisch says an in-state dental hygiene program will entice dentists to locate in Vermont because it will create a pool of the professionals they need for their practices.

"The program is just so important to have in the state," Fisch said. "Without it, we would be in even a worse situation in terms of dental care."

Vermont Technical College's program accepts a maximum of 24 students each year; this year there are 46 students, 23 in each of the two classes. After a slump in applications in the 1990s because of the program's uncertain future at UVM, Vermont Technical College has received three times more applicants than slots.

"There are jobs waiting for them," explained Menchini, the dean. Although tuition is \$9,624 a year for Vermont residents and \$24,096 for out-of-state students, Menchini said, graduates can look forward to annual salaries of \$55,000 with regular, day-time hours.

Good pay and the chance to work with children convinced Jennifer Cook, 28, to make the two-year commitment to commute from her home in Newport to the Chittenden County program.

She expects to make three times what she earned as a dental assistant for the past eight years. The second-year student said she already has a job offer from the dental practice where she worked.

"There is a big need for people to educate about oral health care, especially in my area," Cook said. "There are children that come in every day and have rampant caries and need help."

Cook said she couldn't have made the jump from dental assistant, which she learned on the job, to dental hygienist if there hadn't been an in-state school. She and her husband recently built a home and they have a 3-year-old daughter.

"It wasn't even a thought about relocating," she said. "I would have probably opted not to go to hygiene school."